

St. Mary's Cathedral (now St. Mary's Church)  
328 Fifth Avenue, North  
Nashville  
Davidson County  
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-13

HABS,  
TENN.  
19 NASH,  
8 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Architectural and Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS NO. TENN-13

## ST. MARY'S CATHEDRAL (now St. Mary's Church)

Location: 328 Fifth Avenue, North  
Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee  
Latitude: 36°09'56" N. Longitude: 86°46'53" W.

Present Owner: Ownership held in the name of the Most Rev. Joseph A. Durick, Bishop of Nashville, in fee simple impressed with the trust.

Present Occupant: Parish of St. Mary's Church

Present Use: House of Worship

Statement of Significance: Begun in 1844, St. Mary's Cathedral was designed by the famed architect, William Strickland, soon after his arrival in Nashville, Tennessee. A simple, well-proportioned Greek Revival edifice, it is said to have been considered by Strickland to be his best ecclesiastical design. The tomb of Bishop Richard P. Miles, who was largely responsible for the erection of the cathedral, lies beneath its high altar. Father Abram Ryan, the "Poet Priest of the South," served as its assistant pastor from 1864 to 1865.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: On March 30, 1844, Bishop Richard P. Miles purchased from Vernon K. Stevenson the property on which St. Mary's was erected and is presently situated [RODC Deed Book 6, p. 675]. Ownership has continued at the hands of the Nashville diocese to the present day, with each successive bishop holding title to the property, in the manner noted above.
2. Date of erection: Construction was begun in 1844; the cornerstone was laid on June 6, 1844. The cathedral was dedicated under the title of "Blessed Virgin of the Seven Dolors" on October 31, 1847.
3. Architect: William Strickland
4. Builder or contractor, suppliers: Not known for the initial construction.

5. Original plans and construction: None of the original drawings that may have been produced by Strickland could be located or are otherwise known to have survived to the present time.

According to a contemporary account, however, " . . . the new Cathedral of Nashville . . . is a chaste and beautiful specimen of Grecian architecture, and is situated in the heart of the city. Its external dimensions are one hundred and ten feet in length by sixty in breadth. The ceiling is thirty-two feet above the floor; it is flat, and is tastefully decorated with mouldings and square panel work. The front presents a neat half [distyle in antis] portico supported by two fine Ionic columns; and the entire exterior and interior of the edifice are ornamented with pilasters placed at suitable distances, imparting additional strength to the walls.

Under the Cathedral there is a spacious and commodious basement designed for catechism classes and school rooms. The high altar stands in a semi-circular recess, and is surmounted by an appropriate group of statuary . . . composed of what is called sand-stone paper, and the whole group was procured in France." [The Catholic Advocate, November 20, 1847].

Though of a later date, another source is especially descriptive of the interior arrangement of the church. As seen in 1870, " . . . there is one main entrance on the west side, leading up from a flight of stone steps, and one entrance to the choir gallery at the southwest corner. A triple archway divides a spacious vestibule from the auditorium. In the center of this archway stands the holy font. The inside of the auditorium is well-arranged, and has three aisles separating six rows of pews, which are capable of seating from 900 to 1,000 persons. The chancel is divided from the auditorium by a small balustrade stretching full length across the house. In the gallery, reserved for the choir, which extends across the building at the western extremity, is a splendid organ, which was bought in 1849, and though having been in constant use more than twenty years, still possesses great power and tone. It is encased in oak, and is of Grecian architecture. It contains 24 stops, 2 key boards, 25 gilt pipes, and one octave of pedals, and its cost was about \$2,000 . . . . Immediately over the west end of the building is the belfry, which contains a powerful bell, purchased in 1863. On the south side of the building there is a passage way, which connects the Cathedral with the Bishop's residence adjoining." [Charles E. Roberts, Nashville and Her Trade (Nashville, 1870), 453-454].

Another document, Southern Engineering and Appraisal Company's Appraisal [of] Saint Mary's Church and Saint Mary's Rectory (Nashville, 1933), provides a brief account of the original construction. Regarding the original foundations, the appraisal states that " . . . all the foundations below the present ground surface are native rubble stone [probably limestone], laid up in lime mortar. The exposed foundation on the North side is dressed Ashlar masonry of native limestone, laid up with lime mortar . . . . The foundation on the rear and South sides are principally brick, approximately three feet thick, the South side being stuccoed on the exterior." [p. 16]

The appraisal further observes that ". . . the building was originally constructed from good hard burned brick laid in lime mortar." [p. 16]

The framing system originally employed is also partially described in the appraisal: "The girders in the basement are 12x12 hewn timbers, carried on [ten] cast iron columns . . . . The floor joists are 3x12 on 16" centers, apparently . . . hand sawn. The ceiling joists are 2x6 pine spaced approximately 16" o.c. [probably not original] and truss timbers [seven roof trusses] are old material apparently hand sawn." [p. 18]

The church edifice was said to have been completed in 1847 at a cost of \$47,000. [Daniel F. Barr, Souvenir of St. Mary's Cathedral (Nashville, 1897), 37].

It is appropriate to note in this section that the present stone facade has been long considered to be part of the building's original fabric, though the interior and side facades are recognized as having been altered from the original. The most authoritative published sources for this supposition seems to be Agnes A. Gilchrist's William Strickland, Architect and Engineer 1788-1854 (Philadelphia, 1950). She writes that ". . . the interior and the side exterior wall have been changed, but the marble facade has been untouched . . . ." [p. 17]; elsewhere in the work, she notes again that ". . . the facade of Tennessee marble [sic] is in its original condition, but the side wall and interior have been altered . . ." [p. 106].

However, documents just uncovered in the vault of the Nashville Chancery Office provide conclusive evidence that the exterior walls of the original building, including the West or front facade, were originally entirely of brick.

These documents -- plans and specifications prepared in 1926 for alterations to the church building by the Nashville architectural firm of Asmus & Clark -- provide " . . . the walls of the entrance porch . . . shall be veneered with face brick . . . laid directly against the existing brick . . ." [N.B.: underlining added by the compiler of this HABS report; Asmus & Clark, General Specifications for Remodeling and Additions for St. Mary's Church (Nashville, 1926), 23; see also their working drawings, Alterations to Saint Mary's Church (Nashville, 1926), sheet 3, which illustrates this provision clearly].

It is only in an addendum to the above specifications that the architects stipulate that, rather than veneer the facade with face brick as first specified, " . . . the West Elevation . . . shall be veneered with Nashville Travatine [sic] Stone . . ." [Asmus & Clark, Addenda to Specifications, St. Mary's Church (Nashville, 1926), 1].

Moreover, this development is recorded in two subsequent sources. The above cited Appraisal . . . notes that " . . . in 1929 [sic] the front or West elevation was faced with Nashville Travatine Stone and the North or Cedar Street side was veneered with gray pressed brick" [op. cit., p. 17]. More recently a historical sketch of St. Mary's Church notes that " . . . the north and south side of the church were veneered with brick, and the whole front of the edifice was finished with stone" [Old St. Mary's (Nashville, 1947), 30].

6. Alterations and additions: No records have survived prior to 1894, so that it is not possible to determine, and especially to document, any alterations made prior to that time.

A published account dating from 1897, however, refers to alterations made to the interior, c. 1895, though the reference is far from descriptive: " . . . It remained, however, for the present Bishop [Thomas S. Byrne] to remodel and transform its interior into that beautiful and artistic picture which it now presents. The idea is drawn from the basilicas of Rome, and the brush of the painter, intensified by the symmetrical arrangement of the myriads of electric lights, gives to the interior of the church edifice a splendor which must be witnessed to be fully appreciated. The memorial windows which now replace the former ones are

the latest conception of the artistic in stained glass, and are a most fitting climax to the exquisite finish of St. Mary's Cathedral" [Daniel F. Barr, Souvenir of St. Mary's Cathedral (Nashville, 1897), 37].

However, another document just discovered in the vault of the Chancery office sheds further light on the scope and extent of the interior re-decoration. The document, a bid from the Decorative Art Company to decorate and paint the interior of the church, reads as follows:

"Dear Sir:

"We herewith agree to decorate and paint the interior of the Catholic Cathedral of the City of Nashville, Tennessee, as follows:-

"Ceiling of main auditorium as per our designs in oil colors, in an effect of white and gold.

"Walls a slightly darker shade down to the dado. The dado to be about five feet high in a still darker shade divided from main wall color by an ornamented band of color and gold.

"The woodwork to be painted in cream color, which includes the main and two side altars and the canopy on one side of the altar and chair. These latter to be treated with gold leaf on high lights of beads and ornamentation.

"In the spaces on right and left of altar we paint an ornamented tablet, one to have the inscription now on wall, the other blank for future use. The present altar rail to be painted in cream tone. The new doors of railing to be ornamented with relief work in panel - painted color of railing and to have gold on high lights of ornament.

"The front of Organ balcony to be ornamented with relief work in panels, painted in colors of general woodwork and touched up with gold. The entire Organ, frame to pipes, to be painted in light harmonious tones and touched up with gold.

"The central panel of ceiling as pr. design with the Bishop's crest, - the four corner panels as pr. design with slight changes in each. The four large side and end panels to represent four epochs in the life of Christ. The stair hall to Organ loft, also Organ loft, to be in simple harmonious tones of color. The Baptistry to be decorated in richer tones, with ornamental frieze and ornaments in the panels of ceiling in soft tones.

"The two rooms on the right and left of altar to be tinted in water colors.

"The niche in back of altar to have a painting of the Crucifixion as pr. our design . . ."

Though undated, the bid carries the signature of acceptance of Father Thomas V. Tobin, pastor of St. Mary's Cathedral at the time of this interior renovation; the amount stipulated for the above work is \$2,250.00, less \$250.00 if the four corner panels on the ceiling are to be left out.

What, unfortunately, is not at all clear is whether the new decorative scheme readapts the one employed by Strickland or applies an entirely new scheme. No evidence has been uncovered, save photographs which are not conclusive, to depict the scheme of the original interior; neither is there any evidence to suggest that the pattern of the coffered ceiling was in any way structurally altered. Only the reference from Barr, quoted above, suggests that the appearance of the interior was substantially altered from what it had been before.

The first major alteration to St. Mary's Church for which records are both available and descriptive is the one performed in 1926 (to which reference has already been made above in discussing the original fabric of the main facade). The project was conducted by the Nashville architectural firm of Asmus & Clark, which prepared the referenced set of working drawings, and specifications, with an important addendum, for the project. J. J. Connors, of Nashville, was the contractor; A. T. Kanaday was the plaster sub-contractor; other sub-contractors are not identified.

As was developed in the preceding section of this report, the original facing of the exterior walls, including the front facade, was brick; whether this brick was either stuccoed or painted is not clear from available material. However, the fact that the 1926 renovation undertook to veneer the prime elevations with face brick suggests that the appearance of these walls was not considered to be in a finished state (photographs of the building dating prior to the renovation suggest that the exterior walls were treated in some fashion to obscure what otherwise should have read as a perceptible brick-patterned surface).

Hence, the entire West, or Front Facade, with the return on the South side including the first two pilasters and the return on the North side including the first pilaster, were veneered with Nashville Travertine Stone (a commercial designation for a local grade of dense limestone), smooth face ashlar, from the water table to the bottom of the existing architrave. A comparison of photographs taken before and after the renovation, however, reveals that the composition of the original facade appears not to have been altered with the application of the stone veneer.

Two fluted Ionic stone columns, set into the distyle in antis portico, replaced the original two columns, thought to be of brick and stucco; new stone bases were furnished, but the original stone capitals were cleaned and reset (it is interesting to note that the scheme first developed by Asmus & Clark, as set forth in their construction documents before being amended by the subsequent Addendum, called for replacing the originals with two pressed steel columns [Asmus & Clark, Specifications . . ., p. 29, and working drawings, Alterations to . . ., sheets 1 and 3]).

The existing stone foundation walls and water tables were bush-hammered.

The face of the North elevation and a three-foot return on the East elevation were veneered with a four-inch gray pressed brick from the top of the existing water table to the bottom of the architrave. The South elevation was re-stuccoed from the grade line up to the bottom of the architrave.

The frieze and parapet of the main cornice, as well as the pediment panel over the portico, were restuccoed.

Existing windows and frames in the nave were replaced with new double-hung windows glazed with "cathedral glass."

Quartered white oak doors were installed in the three entrance doorways off the front portico.

Iron gates were installed in the front portico, set within the openings among the two columns and corner pilasters.

In the roof structure, the original timber roof trusses were drawn up, leveled, braced, and all bolts tightened.

The original belfry, while preserved, underwent some modifications. The wood framing of the belfry was repaired [see also Appraisal . . ., op. cit., 18]. In addition, new sashes and panes were installed in the four cruciform windows. There were, however, two modifications to the exterior of the belfry that appear to have done much to alter its prior sense of balance and proportion: The circular arcade on the top story was, for the first time, closed off with new metal louvers, and the circular clock faces that previously adorned the band immediately below, on bays alternating with the cruciform windows, were removed and the bays subsequently devoid of any openings or surface articulation. [For photographs of belfry prior to this alteration, see Art Work of Nashville (Chicago, 1901), Part 9; pages unnumbered].



Finally, the interior of the church was redecorated with a Craftex finish, simulating stonework. This remodelling project was completed on December 23, 1926 at a cost of \$31,000.00 [Old St. Mary's (Nashville, 1947), 30].

A new high altar of Botticino marble was installed on October 7, 1929, as a cost of \$3,900.00.

The painting of the Admirable Mother was donated to the Church in 1942, and a special chapel was arranged for it in the northwest vestibule, with a small marble altar.

In conjunction with the centennial anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral in 1847, the lower chapel in the basement, which had been used as a temporary chapel during World War II, was remodeled in 1947 into the Bishop Miles Chapel to perpetuate the memory of the bishop, whose body lies in a crypt adjoining the chapel, beneath the great altar in the main church above. The cost of this project was approximately \$25,000.00; and the pews and appurtenances, including the Wurlitzer Electric Organ, were valued at \$2,500.00 [handwritten data on p. 6 of Appraisal . . . , op. cit.].

Also, on the occasion of the centennial, a new organ, using the old tubes, was installed in the church at a cost of \$1,500; at the same time, both the exterior and the interior were refurbished. The scope of the latter project is unknown, but there is no evidence that either portion of the building was modified appreciably from what was known to be its appearance prior to 1947.

7. Important Old Views: Among the two finest photographs of both the exterior and the interior of St. Mary's at the turn of the century -- after the major remodeling of the interior in 1895, but prior to the equally substantial remodeling of the exterior in 1926 -- are the two etched plates published in Art Work of Nashville, Tenn. (Chicago, 1901); Part 6 contains a photograph of the interior, while Part 9 provides one of the exterior [pages unnumbered].

Similar, if not identical plates were published some years earlier in Daniel F. Barr's Souvenir of St. Mary's Cathedral (Nashville, 1897); the exterior and interior views appear on pages 2 and 36, respectively, and, while good, cannot match the quality of those reproduced in the above cited source.

Southern Engineering & Appraisal Company's previously referenced Appraisal . . . contains a section entitled "Photographs" which provides several good views of the exterior dating from 1933.

An exterior view of the building prior to the 1926 remodeling was published in Cochran's Grandeur in Tennessee (New York, 1946), 106.

Finally, the souvenir booklet, Old St. Mary's (Nashville, 1947), provides contemporary photographic reproductions, of modest quality, of the exterior and interior views, pages 4 and 5, respectively.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

St. Mary's Cathedral was designed by the famed architect, William Strickland, who came to Nashville in 1844 to design, and then to superintend the construction of the Capitol Building for Tennessee; he remained in Nashville until his death in 1854, still working on the Tennessee State Capitol, although he had also received and executed numerous other commissions as well [for further information regarding Strickland, see Gilchrist, op. cit.].

The corner stone was laid on June 6, 1844. The ceremony was witnessed by a great number of non-Catholics in Nashville who were interested in, and who had contributed to the construction of the Cathedral even more than had the Catholics, who then were "few in number and poor in means" [Old St. Mary's (Nashville, 1947), 28].

Bishop Pius Miles, the prime force behind the construction of the Cathedral, was the father of the Catholic Church in Tennessee. He died on February 21, 1860, and was buried beneath the high altar in a crypt where his grave remains to the present day. [For an account of the recent discovery of the crypt's contents, see The Nashville Banner, Wednesday, July 30, 1969].

During the Battle of Nashville, St. Mary's was converted into a hospital; following the battle, the interior of the church had to be refurbished [Old St. Mary's, 29].

Father Abram J. Ryan, known variously as the "Poet Priest of the South" and the "Poet Laureate of the Confederacy," served as assistant pastor at St. Mary's from 1864 to 1865.

In 1914, the new Cathedral of the Incarnation was erected on West End Avenue, and St. Mary's Cathedral was reduced to the status of a parish church.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary Sources:

- \* Asmus & Clark, Architects. Alterations to Saint Mary's Church, Fifth Ave., & Cedar St., Nashville, Tennessee. Working Drawings (set of 4 sheets), Commission No. 596, Nashville, Tenn.: Office of Asmus & Clark, July 14, 1926.
- \* -----, Specifications for Remodeling & Additions for St. Mary's Church; Fifth Ave., & Cedar St., Nashville, Tennessee. Commission No. 596. Nashville, Tenn.: Office of Asmus & Clark, Architects, July 14, 1926.
- \* -----, Addenda to Specifications. St. Mary's Church, Nashville, Tennessee. Commission No. 596. Nashville, Tenn.: Office of Asmus & Clark, August 9, 1926.
- \* Collection of assorted bids from sub-contractors concerning 1926 remodeling [except as noted above, no evidence to indicate whether the remaining bids are those finally accepted, and the respective sub-contractors those finally selected].
- \* Contract between J. J. Connors, Nashville general contractor for project, and A. T. Kanaday, Nashville plaster sub-contractor for project, dated August 9, 1926; for plaster work in remodeling project for St. Mary's Church.

County Court Clerk's Office for Davidson County,  
Tennessee

Will Book 18, p. 298

Will Book 41, p. 301

- \* The Decorative Art Co., "[Proposal] to decorate and paint the interior of the Catholic Cathedral of the City of Nashville."  
Undated, but ca. 1895.

Register's Office for Davidson County, Tennessee

- \* Deed Book 6, p. 675
- Deed Book 37, p. 156
- Deed Book 85, p. 134
- Deed Book 190, p. 578
- Deed Book 199, p. 60
- Deed Book 666, p. 365
- Deed Book 737, p. 117
- Deed Book 1915, p. 373

\* Southern Engineering & Appraisal Co., Appraisal: Saint Mary's Church and Saint Mary's Rectory, Fifth Ave., & Cedar St. Nashville, Tenn.: Office of the Southern Engineering & Appraisal Co., March 1, 1933.

\* - designates material on deposit in vault of the Chancery Office of the Nashville Diocese.

2. Secondary Sources:

Barr, Daniel F. Souvenir of St. Mary's Cathedral, Including the Century's Annals of the Roman Catholic Church in Nashville. Nashville, Tenn.: Burton & Fick, 1897.

Cochran, Gifford A. Grandeur in Tennessee. Classical Revival Architecture in a Pioneer State. In collaboration with F. Burrall Hoffman. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1946.

Federal Writers' Project. Tennessee: A Guide to the State (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 200.

Gilchrist, Agnes A. William Strickland, Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 17, 106.

\* Nashville Title Co. "Abstract of Title to Part of Lot No. 74 on the Plan of the Original Town of Nashville." Prepared for the Rt. Rev. Thomas S. Byrne. [appended are supplementary abstracts prepared by the Security Title Co., as of November 15, 1929].

O' Daniel, V. F. The Father of the Church in Tennessee, or the Life, Times, and Character of the Right Reverend Richard Pius Miles, O. P., the First Bishop of Nashville (Washington, D.C.: The Cominiana, 1926), 396, 397, 398, 403, 408, 414, 415, and 423-427.

Old St. Mary's. An Historical Sketch of St. Mary's Church, Nashville, Tenn., 1847-1947. Published for the Centennial of the Dedication of the Church. (Nashville, Tenn.: Cullum & Ghertner Co.), 1947.

Wooldridge, John, ed. History of Nashville, Tennessee. (Nashville, Tenn.: H. W. Crew, 1890), 499-501.

Newspaper Accounts:

Nashville Daily Union. Nashville, Tennessee,  
November 3, 1847.

Republican Banner. Nashville, Tennessee,  
November 5, 1847.

The Catholic Advocate. November 20, 1847.

The Nashville Banner. Nashville, Tennessee,  
January 19, 1930.

The Nashville Banner. Nashville, Tennessee,  
July 30, 1967.

Prepared by: Anatole Senkevitch, Jr.  
Architectural Historian  
& Architect  
National Park Service  
Summer, 1970

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: St. Mary's Cathedral was designed by famed architect William Strickland, soon after his arrival in Nashville, Tennessee. A well-proportioned, simple building with excellent details, St. Mary's is said to have been considered by Strickland to be his best ecclesiastical design.
2. Condition of fabric: Well-maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 109' - 4" x 60' - 1"
2. Number of stories: One.
3. Layout, shape: Rectangular.
4. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick with grey stone facing.
5. Structural system: Wooden truss.
6. Porches: Portico in antis.

7. Openings, doors and windows: Oak doors with recessed panels; 8 double hung multicolor stained glass windows.
8. Roof: Simple pitch, metal covering with standing seam; Ionic entablature.
9. Towers: One tower on the SW elevation.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The narthex is flanked by two small rooms and leads to the sanctuary.
2. Stairways: The stairway to the choir loft is located in the southwest corner of the building.
3. Flooring: There is partial carpeting over painted hardwood flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster walls; painted wooden coffered ceiling with egg and dart modillions.
5. Doors: 7' - 6" high doors with three raised panels on each side.
6. Special decorative features: Corinthian column apse; semi-circular exedra.

D. Site:

1. General setting: St. Mary's faces west on 5th Avenue adjacent to the Tennessee State Capitol. The rectory is south of the church and is connected by a corridor on the main level. The chancery office building is directly behind the church across an alleyway.

Prepared by: Roy C. Pledger  
Supervisory Architect  
National Park Service  
Summer, 1970

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. Measured and drawn July 1970, under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Roy C. Pledger, project supervisor (Texas A & M University), Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., historian (University of Virginia), by student architects Donald W. Graham and William H. Edwards (University of Illinois), and Donna G. Woodrum and Robert J. Dunay (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. The photographer was Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff.